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ABSTRACT

Migrant students face many educational difficulties as they travel with their families to find work. This chapter reviews specific challenges facing migrant secondary students. The timing of harvest seasons dictates the movements of migrant workers and families, resulting in students' late entry into or early withdrawal from school. Lost class time and excessive absences may cause students to lose credits or miss required testing, discourage students from taking advanced courses that would prepare them for postsecondary education, or lead students to drop out. Whether migrant students enter late or withdraw early, the proper transfer of student records is critical. Hand-carrying documents is recommended. Moving between schools, migrant students frequently encounter course dissimilarities or unavailable courses, disparities in course credits or grade equivalents, and different class schedules. Nontraditional schedules such as block scheduling are particularly problematic for transfer students. Credit accrual is difficult as students may need to play catch up or retake classes entirely. Although evening school or summer school may be available, most older migrant students work, making attendance difficult. Living in the poor housing conditions of migrant camps also interferes with studying. Distance-learning schemes exist, but correspondence courses require independent study and computer-based courses require a working phone line, which migrant families may lack. (SV)

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CHAPTER 8

Scholastic Demands on Intrastate and Interstate Migrant Secondary Students

BY JORGE J. SOLÍS

Students encounter myriad educational difficulties and interruptions when they migrate to help their families financially. As an educator and administrator for more than 25 years, I have witnessed the toll these challenges can take on migrant students, especially at the secondary level. This chapter provides an overview of specific challenges facing migrant secondary students.

Late Entry/Early Withdrawal

The economic situations of many migrant students and their families rule out the option of staying in school throughout an entire school year. Migrants cannot dictate when harvest seasons begin or end, and they risk losing jobs if they do not arrive at a work site on time. This frequently delays migrant students' return to their home schools until after the school year has begun or forces them to leave before the year has ended. Migrant students traveling long distances to find work will miss even more days of instruction. The lost class time discourages many migrant high school students, who drop out at higher rates than other students.

Interruption in the education of migrant students is described as late entry and/or early withdrawal. Many migrant students have

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trouble attending school the number of days required by state laws. Migrants who enroll in school late have the added pressure of making up work. In many instances, these students lose credits due to excessive absences, particularly in school districts that do not have attendance policies designed to help migrant students. Those who withdraw between January and April could miss annual standardized testing or the exit-level tests required in some states for graduation. Most importantly, late entry/early withdrawal students lose valuable classroom instruction time.

Late enrollment or the anticipation of early withdrawal also discourages students from taking the more difficult courses required of higher graduation plans (e.g., college prep or advanced placement). As a result, migrant students frequently are excluded from the courses that could best prepare them for a successful postsecondary education. Additionally, irregular enrollment patterns prevent many migrant students from taking pretests for college admissions or scholarships; competing in some sports; or participating in extracurricular events, clubs, and organizations.

Last but not least, some schools tell migrant students who arrive in late November or early December not to enroll because the term is almost over. Likewise, receiving schools sometimes discourage migrants from enrolling late in the school year. These scenarios contribute to students falling behind in their high school credits, increasing their likelihood of dropping out.

Transfer of Education Records

Whether migrant students enter late or withdraw early, the proper transfer of education records is critical. Some parents and secondary students do not understand the importance of hand-carrying as many education documents as possible, which makes it easier to transition into another school district. The Texas Migrant Student Transfer Packet System, otherwise known as the "Red Bag," provides migrant families with a red canvas bag for their children's school records. The program also trains migrant families on the education system and how to interpret important school documents. Other states have borrowed the concept and now offer their own versions of the Red Bag.

Migrant families sometimes need to leave on short notice and fail to withdraw their children from schools properly. The transfer of

education records is essential for effective placement and/or credit accrual. Some parents do not know they have a right to copies of these records, even special education confidential records. A receiving school may delay enrolling a student until the records have been faxed or, even worse, mailed.

Schedule Conflicts and Course Credit/Grade Equivalents

Moving between schools, migrant students frequently encounter course dissimilarities and/or unavailable courses, disparities in course credits or grade equivalents, and different class schedules. Some receiving schools may not offer a particular class required by a migrant student's home-base district. Migrant students sometimes must take the course as an elective or wait until they have returned to their home-base school. In the worst-case scenario, they could lose credit for the course.

Some classes are closed to migrant students enrolling late in a semester, even if the student was taking that course where he or she was last enrolled. Often in these cases, states allow only a certain number of students per class and per teacher. Higher level classes may be in such demand that they fill up quickly, discouraging some migrant students from taking these classes and graduating under the most advanced graduation plans.

School districts that run nontraditional class schedules, such as block scheduling, pose yet another obstacle in transferring from one school to another. Migrant high school students tend to fall behind in credits while playing catch up or retaking classes entirely.

Migrant students sometimes have problems receiving credits for courses they have already taken and passed due to differences in a receiving school's grades, class credits, or state-mandated curriculum requirements. A grade of 60 or above, for example, passes in some states but not in others. Some schools average out the two semesters of a course to give a student full credit if he or she has an overall grade of 70; other schools average out the two semesters only if the student has failed the first semester but not the second.

Evening and Summer School Hindrances

Some migrant high school students attend evening school in receiving states. This places yet another burden on students who work

during the day, often from dawn until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m., and then must attend school from 7:00 to 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. Not only is this tiring, but imagine trying to find time to study or do homework.

Many nonmigrant students enroll in summer school to make up missed credits. However, most migrant students work in the summer or do not have convenient access to summer school programs. Others will enroll in summer school but move again before earning any kind of credit. Some states charge a fee to attend summer school, an expense most migrant families cannot afford.

Limitations Imposed by Living in Migrant Camps

Living in migrant camps also affects a student's academic success. Some camps have only the bare essentials: bathroom and shower facilities in a separate unit and used by all families, no air conditioning, and several family members sharing one room. The overcrowded, noisy, and poorly lit living quarters make studying difficult. Transportation can be a problem when the camp is far from school; parents sometimes cannot take their children to school, particularly in bad weather.

Other Concerns and Possible Solutions

Migrant students still run into obstacles despite the many assistance programs available and the benefits of new and emerging technologies. Students taking correspondence courses often need to work by themselves without guidance from a teacher. When and if the correspondence course is completed, a student still needs a professional educator to administer the semester exam. Students occasionally must wait until they enroll again in school to take the exams. Programs that provide laptop computers have helped migrant students complete high school courses from a distance. However, this process requires a working phone line, which some migrant families lack, and only a small percentage of migrant students have access to these programs.

Conclusions

Migrant students face many difficulties, obstacles, interruptions, and concerns in getting a well-rounded and complete education. Yet, a high school diploma is more important today than ever before.

Some school districts, whose experiences are described in this book, provide programs that help migrant students work through the concerns outlined in this chapter. Hopefully, others will follow in their footsteps and find ways to offer migrant students every opportunity to succeed by removing obstacles or helping students find ways to overcome them.

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